

A Reconciliation with Reality and Self-Preservation —George MacDonald’s Interpretation of Early Death in *At the Back of the North Wind*

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ABSTRACT

The untimely loss of a loved one is an excruciating ordeal. Renowned Victorian Scottish writer George MacDonald was obliged to face the recurring early deaths of family members all his lifetime. Drawing from the background of Victorian literature and his working experience in church, he forges a reconciliation with reality and realizes his self-preservation through religion. His masterpiece, *At the Back of the North Wind*, is the reflection of his life sufferings, inner world, and way of reconciliation with reality. By examining the characterization of Diamond and North Wind, two leading characters in the book, and the employment of his unique literary technique, this article aims to reveal his motivation in portraying the protagonist of the book—Diamond, a poor little boy living in London, and conclude MacDonald’s means of self-preservation, i.e., interpretation of early death: those who pass away at a young age are angels from heaven. After fulfilling their earthly missions, they return to a better realm they inherently belong to—Heaven. Hence, earthly life is only a fragment of human beings’ existence. MacDonald’s coming to terms with bereavement while facing death holds practical significance today, especially for the people suffering from the loss of loved ones during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Introduction

George MacDonald (10 December 1824 — 18 September 1905) is a renowned Victorian Scottish writer. Though successful in his writing career, death was a constant presence in his life. When he was five years old, his brother John Mackay died at birth. Three years later, his mother died of tuberculosis. In 1878, his daughter, Mary Josephine, died. The next year, his son, Maurice, who is usually believed to be the prototype of Diamond, also died. The next decade saw the deaths of his daughter Grace, his granddaughter Octavia, his daughter-in-law, Louise Virenda Blandy, wife of his son Ronald, and his most beloved child, Lilia, to mention but a few. So many tragedies go beyond the endurance of normal people, and George MacDonald is not an exception. It was urgent for him to find consolation for his grief-riddled mind in this sad world so as to acquire inner tranquility. He needed to work out a meaningful interpretation of his loss. Under such circumstances, religion was the best channel through which he made reconciliation with reality and the best way to realize his inner peace, saving himself from endless sorrow for losing his beloved kinsfolk.

He turned to religion for an answer thanks to the Victorian period’s portrayal of good dead young children as well as his working experience as a minister. MacDonald grew up in a Congregational Church, with an atmosphere of Calvinism. In his twenties, he graduated from the University of Aberdeen and then went to London, studying at Highbury College for the Congregational ministry. After graduation, he sought opportunities to apply what he learned into practice. MacDonald was appointed minister of Trinity Congregational Church, Arundel, in 1850. In his sermons, he preached God’s universal love and insisted on the possibility that none would, ultimately, fail to unite with God. Later, he was engaged in ministerial work in Manchester. Years

of concentrating on religion and working in church helped MacDonald gain a penetrating understanding of Christianity and establish a firm belief in God's benevolence. He maintains that all the ups and downs of a person, including his/her birth, promotion, exile, aging, sickness, and death, are all God's will. All Human beings come to this world with specifically assigned missions from God. He continues that God grants the "good dead young children" better lives after their death for they are God's messengers. They come to this world and bring joy and peace, following God's instructions. He advocates for parents not to weep over their children's early death because the children leave them for new tasks to fulfil. People should not confine themselves to welcoming their newborn babies with ecstasy; furthermore: they are also required to accept their children's early departure with peace of mind, for their children are leaving for a more promising land and life. "How real death makes things look! And how we learn to cleave to the one shining fact in the midst of the darkness of this world's trouble, that Jesus did rise radiant"(Sadler 22)! It is God's love that summons parents' children, God's angels, back to heaven. In his interpretation, his young dead family members are angels from heaven who never truly belonged to this secular world. He also retains the faith that loved ones will be united after death at the end of life.

***At the Back of the North Wind*, George MacDonald's Interpretation of Early Death**

At the Back of the North Wind, MacDonald's masterpiece, is a book written in the form of fantasy. The book centers on a boy named Diamond and his adventures with the mysterious Lady North Wind. Diamond is an angel-like little boy who brings joy everywhere he visits. He fights despair and brings happiness to his family and people around him. He dies at a very early age which is a common practice in Victorian children's literature, for he is a child too good to live in this world. It reflects MacDonald's life sufferings and demonstrates his interpretation of early departure from a religious point of view. We can witness his argument and assertion about death from the portrayal of two important leading characters: Diamond, a boy who exhibits the author's argument, and North Wind, a figure who justifies the author's argument.

Diamond, Exhibition of the Author's Argument

Diamond's early death corresponds to MacDonald's irretrievable loss of his family members. MacDonald's interpretation of Diamond's death mirrors his acceptance and understanding of immortality in real life. MacDonald convinces his audience that Diamond is an angel carrying God's universal love from the following perspectives.

First, the name of the protagonist, Diamond, which symbolizes literally rarity, value, and dignity, suggests how precious the hero is. The significance and indication of "Diamond" are clearly illustrated, which helps us sense MacDonald's deep affection and remorse for Diamond in the book as well as his family members in reality. Diamonds are highly valued and treasured as jewelry. MacDonald instills his infinite love into the name. Apart from its literal meaning, MacDonald's emotion is also reflected in how precious "*Diamond*" is for Diamond's father. The name comes from an old horse with which Diamond's father makes a living. "His father, who was a coachman, had named him after a favorite horse, and his mother had had no objection"(MacDonald 45). For his father, the horse Diamond is not only the family's origin of financial resource, which is of primary importance for a poor household, but also a close and inseparable friend. He fails to restrain himself and bursts into tears on seeing old Diamond after having separated from him due to the ruin of Mr. Coleman, his first employer in the book. "But the coachman had a lump in his throat and tears in his eyes ... the coachman's arms were round the horse's neck in a moment, and he fairly broke down and cried" (MacDonald 146). From these, we discern that "Diamond" is far from a common name but conveys the author's deep love and untold affection.

Second, Diamond, a polite working-class child, is depicted as an omnipotent angel-like boy who spreads benevolence to people around him, not only to his own family but also to strangers and allegedly badly-behaved people.

For his family, he functions well beyond a little boy who is considered under the shelter of his parents but shoulders responsibilities to spare his parents their burden. His mother once comments: “You’re as good to your mother as if you were a girl—nursing the baby, and toasting the bread, and sweeping up the hearth! I declare a body would think you had been among the fairies”(MacDonald 151). He is willing to help her with the housework; furthermore, he soothes her and gives her advice when their family suffers from a financial crisis, which should never be his concern. After his first employer, Mr. Coleman, goes bankrupt, Diamond’s father loses his job. His father is forced to take up a business for himself as a cabbie. Unfortunately, Diamond’s father falls ill soon and can no longer work. Little Diamond stands up and takes over his father’s responsibilities for the family by driving his father’s cab. Diamond not only tackles the temporary financial problem for the family but also changes his father’s fortunes by making his father coachman to Mr. Raymond, a decent and warm-hearted gentleman in the book, without a qualification. In a sense, Diamond is not a boy who needs parental protection but a life instructor for his despairing parents.

Diamond’s charity also extends to strangers. Nanny is a parentless girl sweeper living with a drunken old woman named Sal, who is very cruel to her sometimes, and “shuts her out in the streets at night, if she happens to be late”(MacDonald 156). Diamond sympathizes with her sufferings and befriends this rude working-class girl. He saves her life by sending her to a hospital with the help of Mr. Raymond when Nanny is on the verge of death. “The crawling, many-footed creature, when it turns sick and ill, and revives a butterfly, with two wings instead of many feet”(MacDonald 215). Diamond also changes Nanny’s fate by making her work for Mr. Raymond. After that, she is refreshed, educated, civilized, and transformed from a rough girl to a gentle maiden.

Diamond influences others with his selfless kindness. His neighbor is a cabman who always drinks too much beer and comes home chiefly to quarrel with his wife and pinch his children. One night, when the coachman roars at his family again, Diamond goes to their home and comforts the frightened little baby. He takes the little baby out of the cradle and sets him up on his knee, singing and smiling to the baby. The baby smiles to the lamp sitting on Diamond’s knees. Diamond’s song is the voice of the great Love that tells the drunk man to be good. Diamond’s deeds contribute to the moral reform of the drunken neighbor. The drunk cabman feels regretful for his rude behavior towards his family and begins the process of self-transformation. “He was never quite so bad after that”(MacDonald 171).

Third, MacDonald discloses Diamond’s fate that he is doomed to die young. Just as his name implies, Diamond, shining and precious but cold and difficult to get, cannot last long in the world. He is a boy too good for this world.

His death is presaged when he was born to this world. His family is poor, and his parents cannot afford a decent shelter when his mother gave birth to him. He was born deficient, for he was exposed to the wind when he came to this world. North Wind tells Diamond: “I was with her when you were born. I saw her laugh and cry both at once”(MacDonald 53). As a little boy, he is confined to sleep in a shabby room, which wind can penetrate at night, accelerating the deterioration of his health.

Diamond’s death is symbolized when he and his family move to “The Mound”, a title that evokes the serenity and solemnity of death. His death is further indicated when he is hired as a page. “In fact his ‘job’ is to be a flowerlike object of wonder and beauty, gazed upon lovingly by his adult admirers—his employers” (MacDonald 126). The image here is no longer a secular boy among human beings but an angel-like immortal coming from heaven who brings pleasure and tranquility to the people living on the earth. In others’ eyes, he is never one of them but belongs to another world. They called him “God’s baby”(MacDonald 243).

Fourth, MacDonald proposes that death is not the end but a gateway to a new world. Death is not death at all, but a rebirth into a life different than the one is experiencing presently.

MacDonald is a religious writer who attempts to rekindle “hope, optimism and faith”(Davies 37). He

maintains that God continues to be a benevolent father, who having given children to their earthly parents, would not take them away for something worse than their earthly life. Instead, God will offer them something much better than they possess in the secular world. Their lives are not extinguished by the God of Death, but they return to the paradise where they inherently belong to. In his interpretation, he argues that his beloved ones, who died at an early age, are angels from heaven with beautiful souls. They went back to their destination, God's side, to pursue a more meaningful life after fulfilling their duties on the earth.

MacDonald's proposal is vividly presented in *At the Back of the North Wind*. In the book, Diamond's experiences reflect MacDonald's wishes and hopes for his loved ones. Diamond flies across London, discovers people's sufferings, and gets them out of trouble by sitting at the back of the North Wind. This is exactly angels' routine job: flying in the sky, overlooking the world, spotting people's difficulties, and spreading God's benevolence to those who need help. Diamond's way of offering help corresponds to angels' way of spreading God's philanthropy. It is evident that Diamond appears to be an angel to the audience in the book. The author's writing intention is clearly illustrated here: "The little boy was just as much one of God's messengers as if he had been an angel with a flaming sword, going out to fight the devil"(MacDonald 166-167).

That land at the back of the north wind is a holding place, not a final destination. Diamond's journey is not over. There is more to come. He returns to the heaven where he comes from after sending God's mercy to the needed human beings. For him, death is only a part of life rather than an end to it, and there is hope of immortality. The time in the world is only a small part of his journey, and death is merely a point of transition from this world to heaven.

MacDonald provides a satisfactory and feasible interpretation of Diamond's early death and the passing of MacDonald's loved ones as well. His theory serves as a beacon of solace for his contemporaries and future generations who experienced the same sufferings he endured. Thus, he reaches a reconciliation with merciless reality and achieves his inner peace.

The North Wind, Justification for the Author's Argument

Another important figure in the novel is North Wind. While Diamond is the overall exhibition of MacDonald's argument, North Wind is the helper to justify his argument. She is complicated, functional, efficient, and should never be neglected.

First, she is the catalyst of the story and the incentive to boost the development of the story. She is the one who creates opportunities for Diamond so that he has possibilities to help others. It is because of the acquaintance with the North Wind that Diamond has the chance to fly across London and starts his adventures by sitting at her. It is North Wind that destroys Mr. Coleman's investment, which forces Diamond's father to take up the business of driving a cab. The cabman career enables Diamond to get to know Mr. Raymond, who offers a position for Diamond's father and provides Diamond with education, a blessing Diamond would never receive without Mr. Raymond's intervention because of his meager family background. It is by sitting at the back of the North Wind that Diamond learns the trouble of the poor little girl, Nanny, who is saved by Diamond later and has the opportunity to start her brand new life. It is because of North Wind that Mrs. Coleman, wife of his former master, is obliged to call a cab for her fragile daughter, which leads to Diamond's knowledge of their new address. It is North Wind that breaks the breaching of the cab, which grants Diamond a feasible excuse to stop at Miss Coleman's house to fix the cab. The stop contributes to the reunion of Mr. Evan and Miss Coleman, a couple who have an engagement but separate due to some misunderstandings.

Second, North Wind is the reason why Diamond becomes a perfect and brave boy and becomes qualified to accomplish God's assignments. She is a caring, knowledgeable, and determined lady who offers selfless love and guidance to him, whose mother's care and father's instruction are absent. Before Diamond, she is a beautiful lady, a female image that embodies tenderness, charity, and love. "Leaning over him was the large beautiful pale face of a woman" (MacDonald 51). She is practically a loving mother and instructive father to

him. In the beginning, in the first conversation between Diamond and North Wind, their discussion of the difference between windows and holes is difficult for him to understand, but he learns that understanding comes with a willingness to have an open mind that qualifies him to start his adventurous journey. North Wind clarifies his misunderstanding of his name—Diamond, and teaches him to be brave.

“I couldn’t hold a little coward to my heart. It would make me so cold!” [North Wind said.]

‘But I wasn’t brave of myself,’ said Diamond ... ‘It was the wind that blew in my face that made me brave ...’

‘... you have to be taught what courage was ... Beginning is the greatest thing of all. To try to be brave is to be brave’” (MacDonald 101-102).

It is with courage that he drives as a cabman for his father at such an early age; it is with courage that he comforts the little baby facing a drunk and furious man; it is with courage that he saves a little girl from being bullied by confronting some rough young imps. Diamond couldn’t have conveyed God’s universal love to others without courage. He becomes God’s perfect messenger with North Wind’s encouragement and instruction.

Third, she is the agent through which God manifests his omnipotent power and the carrier with which Diamond returns to his promised land. On one hand, the North Wind is a loving and protective parent, while on the other hand, she is the agent of death without any doubt. She is both life-giving energy and a death-dealing carrier. She is a double-faced figure who embodies paradox, symbolizing death and embodying love. She has dreadful destructive power and many terrifying names in mankind’s mouths. “Sometimes, they call me Bad Fortune, sometimes Evil Chance, sometimes Ruin; and they have another name for me which they think the most dreadful of all” (MacDonald 289). Though North Wind doesn’t mention what the most dreadful name is, we all know it is “death”. Each encounter with North Wind contributes to Diamond’s illness, including headache, fever, and chills, and sometimes leaves him close to death.

“Oh, Diamond, my darling! You have been so ill!” she sobbed.

‘No, mother dear. I’ve only been at the back of the north wind,’ returned Diamond.

‘I thought you were dead,’ said his mother’” (MacDonald 131).

Each of Diamond’s journeys with North Wind takes him further and further from home, symbolizing his growing proximity to death. At first, he finds himself in the Colemans’ garden adjacent to his house; next time, he travels around the streets of London; the third trip takes him to the Kent coast, and the last to the North Pole and the country behind North Wind’s back. Each journey takes him further out of himself, and finally, North Wind, the symbol of death, takes away Diamond’s life as indicated. At the end of the story, North Wind tells Diamond: “It is time for you to go home” (MacDonald 295). “Home” in North Wind’s words refers to the paradise where Diamond’s homeland is located. The words suggest Diamond’s ultimate death on the earth. The next morning, people discover Diamond’s death, not on his bed as usual, but “on the floor of the big attic-room just outside his own door” (MacDonald 297), for he must have traveled “at the back of the North Wind” (MacDonald 297). This time, Diamond leaves his family and begins his journey of traveling with North Wind for another time but never returns. She is not Death practically when she is with Diamond, but a carrier who follows God’s order to take Diamond back.

Fourth, North Wind is a powerful assistant with which MacDonald realizes his reconciliation with reality and self-preservation. To guarantee the credibility of Diamond’s conversion to an angel after death, MacDonald strives to make the story convincing and prove his theory. Diamond is not a common boy as those living in this earthly world or reality, but an angel who has the capability to pass through a boundary between reality and fantasy in MacDonald’s interpretation. In this case, the boundary is significantly North Wind herself, who helps the little angel travel between the secular world, reality, and God’s world, fantasy. When North Wind appears before Diamond at night, he steps into a fantasy world. When North Wind disappears in the morning, he goes back to reality. To reach North Wind’s realm, Diamond must cross borders between the material world and dream world, between reality and fiction, and between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead. Diamond’s ability to shift between reality and fantasy with the help of the North Wind plays a crucial role in

MacDonald's justification. Without North Wind, MacDonald's theory of self-realization after death sounds vulnerable. She is an effective literary figure who helps the author convince the audience of his argument.

Unique Writing Technique, Form is Content

In *At the Back of the North Wind*, MacDonald employs a unique writing technique, shuttling between reality and fantasy. MacDonald doesn't adopt the traditional literary practice of addressing moral instruction; instead, he permeates his argument in an exercise of imaginative thinking. He combines Victorian realism with Romantic fantasy successfully in the book by making a breakthrough in letting his protagonist, Diamond, shift between a realistic world and a fantastic world freely with the help of North Wind. This unique technique conforms to MacDonald's religious beliefs and strengthens the credibility of his statement.

In the book, two different realms coexist: reality, where Diamond inhabits, a very real London, one in which commerce dominates human activities and where class and economic division are harsh realities, and fantasy, where North Wind lives, a super-real dimension, one in which superpower dominates human activities and manipulates people's fate. From the very beginning, the book distinguishes itself from conventional ethical educational children's books, for the narrative sounds like telling a far-away fairy tale. MacDonald begins *At the Back of the North Wind* by saying, "I have been asked to tell you about the back of the North Wind" (MacDonald 45). The beginning arouses the audience's expectation of fantasy and curiosity about North Wind. However, the storytelling then goes into a realistic world, Diamond's shabby living room, which functions as a transitional point from a realistic world to a fantastic world, for it is the place where Diamond meets North Wind for the first time. Later on, the audience finds themselves switching continually between Victorian reality and Romantic fantasy. In addition, from the beginning to the end, the book is continually interrupted by fantastic episodes, poems, and stories—a visionary experience Diamond has with some star-children, a long fairy story, "Little Daylight", Nanny's dream of visiting the Man in the Moon, a conversation between two horses, Diamond and Ruby, an angel in disguise, a long poem, and numerous nursery rhymes.

It goes without doubt that only immortals have the magic power to travel between the two kinds of existence. MacDonald argues that Diamond is one of the immortals, for he possesses this capability by illustrating his adventurous journey traveling between reality and fantasy. The first conversation between Diamond and North Wind on whether it is a hole in the room or a window for North Wind to peer through brings into conjunction the real and the supernatural. North Wind, a two-faced beautiful woman in the book, comes to Diamond at night and takes him flying with her at her back. By sitting at the back of the North Wind, Diamond starts his fairy tale journey, flying over London, traveling to the coast, and even visiting the North Pole. By flying in the sky, he witnesses many changes North Wind brought to the earth: she blossomed the tulip, united Mr. Evan and Miss Coleman, trapped Nanny, sank a ship, and drowned people. While at day time, Diamond returns to the realistic world, London, where he lives with his working-class parents. The ability to shift between reality and fantasy proves MacDonald's argument that Diamond is an angel coming from heaven. He possesses superpowers and doesn't belong to this human world. The combination of traditional fairy tale genre and realistic description of daily life reinforces the theme of self-realization, an afterlife with a beautiful soul after death.

How does MacDonald establish the believability of Diamond's superpower to shift between reality and fantasy in these tales? It is the author's knowledge of people's firm belief in God that endows him with the authenticity to convince the audience that although the journey is fantastic, the story is true. His audience is deeply religious Christians. Their religious background leads to their faith that the Supernatural world could coexist with the real world. MacDonald knows that ancient people believed that gods and goddesses walked on the earth with their human followers and participated in their daily lives. It is also deeply rooted in Victorian people's minds that the world is not only a wonder, but a miracle continually being worked by God. There is no difference in solidity between the "real" world and the dream world because each is thought in the mind of God. Our world is a dream in God's mind as much as Diamond's experiences with North Wind. "Fiction itself in the

form of this story, dreams, poems, inset fairy tales, are as solid as our “real” world, all bring us to another world to which we more truly belong” (Pemberton 45). Therefore, readers are likely to suspend their disbelief while reading the book and enter freely into a world where things are not as they seem. He incorporates these ideas into his stories, and employs fairy tale type and realistic narration in the book, which relies upon the pattern of coexistence. MacDonald successfully proves his argument based on people’s religious beliefs.

Form is content. MacDonald’s writing technique of combining fairy tales and reality highlights and emphasizes questions about the relationships between the divine and the secular world, between human mortality and our understanding of identity. His unification of realism and romanticism is the best demonstration and justification of his argument.

Conclusion

George MacDonald’s exploration of acceptance in the face of mortality and the actions of accomplishing self-preservation take on a profound connection with our contemporary world. During the three-year pandemic, countless people lost their relatives and friends, some still in their youth. In this post-Covid-stricken milieu, people began to reconsider the relationship between life and death and how we will accept the fact that our loved ones are gone. Numerous people are in a state of mental dilemma, worrying about their own safety and their beloved one’s possible death. Mental problems are an inescapable topic for today’s human beings and also a tough task for psychologists and sociologists to tackle.

MacDonald’s perspective offers a beacon of solace amidst this disastrous world. He reminds us that our earthly existence is only a little segment of our life-long journey, and death is merely a transition point from this world to the next. In this view, death loses its finality; instead, it serves as a continuation of life in an altered physical and temporal state. As we grapple with the inevitability of mortality, MacDonald’s wisdom encourages us to find our meaningful existence and the nurturing of our inner selves. In essence, George MacDonald’s interpretation of death and his advocacy for self-realization provide medicine for those seeking inner peace and tranquility in the uncertainties of the contemporary world.

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